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ABSTRACT

This study of 20 preservice teachers in a secondary English methods course explored whether materials on diversity, information about language of wider communication, and literature from parallel cultures would have a positive effect on their ability to fairly assess work by high school students from diverse populations. At the beginning of the semester, the students scored and discussed two sets of essays written by tenth- and eleventh-grade students. These essays had already been scored by experienced teachers; these scores and the authors' ethnic identities were hidden from the education students. During the rest of the semester students studied pedagogy, assessment, and issues of diversity including differences in prose development from culturally diverse writers. They also read secondary level literature by nonmainstream writers. At the end of the semester students evaluated the essays again. A comparison between student ratings in the first and second round found that: (1) all but one preservice teachers' scores were lower than those of the expert raters; (2) in all cases but one, preservice teachers' first scores either remained constant or were raised substantially by the end of the semester; and (3) essays which received large jumps in scores were written by students whose ethnicities were very apparent in their work. The paper includes scoring guide, table of the experts' and preservice teachers' scores, essay assignment, and a student essay, "The 'Addquin' Streets of the 'Barrio'." (JB)

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ED 390 854

Preservice Teachers Assess the Writing Quality of Language Minority and Nonmainstream Students: An Experiment

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This paper is a pilot study predicated on three areas of concern for those of us who work with preservice English teachers. The first is the demographic issue of our increasingly multicultural student population. To cite just one source, the new *Encyclopedia of English Studies and Language Arts* (1994, Vol. I, p. 337),

> approximately 40 percent of classrooms in the United States are already comprised of children from diverse groups . . (This number is) (projected to increase to one-third of the nation by (the year) 2010, and one-half by 2050).

And—unlike many culturally and linguistically diverse students of a generation or two ago who sought (more successfully) to assimilate—many of "today's diverse groups have a strong desire to retain the language systems of their cultural heritage."

The second demographic issue is that we are and will remain a predominantly monocultural teaching force for many years. As Florio-Ruane (1994) explains, "despite our continued efforts to recruit and retain a racially, ethnically, and linguistically varied teaching force," the typical beginning teacher in the '90's will be female, . . . Anglo . . . and from a lower- . . . to middle-income family (52).

Zeichner (cited in Florio-Ruane, 1994, 52) notes the "relatively little attention in . . . teacher education reform to

issues of educational and social inequality and to ideas about how to prepare teachers more effectively to teach an increasingly diverse student population. Haberman (1987) tells us that less than 5% of the approximately 45,000 education faculty in the U.S. has taught for even a year in large urban school districts.

My third concern comes from observing my own students who lack the expertise and confidence in assessing student writing—especially from diverse groups. Indeed, writing assessment is a major issue—not just in teacher preparation programs, but in the field of composition pedagogy in general.

Though we all like to believe that we are looking for writing—in keeping with the best tenets of rhetorical theory—research tells us that we sometimes evaluate student writing on the basis of other things—whether we realize it or not. Nold and Freedman (1977) and several others have shown that teachers sometimes inadvertently even reward such elements as essay length and handwriting.

When we factor in cultural bias, we get into deeper trouble. For example, when analyzing essays of African American students from an earlier study of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Smitherman and Wright (Smitherman, 1985) found significant *correlations* between the frequency of what they call Black English and poorer scores.

If we consider issues of second language use, problems with rhetorical strategies which contradict those valued in some western traditions, and other related cultural differences, our

preservice teachers (and those of us who work with them) do, indeed, have cause for alarm.

Now—taking all three of my points together—the changing demographics of our student bodies, the monocultural nature of our teaching force, and preservice teachers' lack of experience assessing writing—especially from nonmainstream groups, I hypothesized that materials on diversity, information about language of wider communication, and literature from parallel cultures would have a positive effect on preservice teachers' ability to more fairly assess writers from diverse populations.

For this study, I chose 20 students from my English methods course. All were from European American heritage except for one Chicana and one Japanese American. Most were from rural areas in eastern Washington, or from the larger Seattle-Tacoma area. Both groups described very little contact with nonmainstream people, though some were from regions with large populations of Chicanos and Native Americans.

I first asked students what characteristics they should look for in evaluating essays. Their comments reflected their own training, emphasizing components like clarity and organization, logical arguments, attention to language conventions such as spelling, grammar, and sentence structure. I next gave them a rubric which has been adapted from several commonly used holistic scoring guides. (see Figure 1) As we discussed these criteria, I reminded them that even the finest essays were not devoid of errors.

Next I gave them the assignment that students were to respond to. (see Figure 2)

My students then scored two sets of essays written by tenth and eleventh-grade students from Minneapolis, Minnesota and Daly City, California. Though they could use scores ranging from 6 to 1, I told them that they were not required to use all the scores, that, indeed, they may find many of the essays quite comparable. Unbeknownst to them, these essays had already been scored by four raters with experience teaching composition, working with ESL students, and working in a university writing lab. I chose essays which had been ranked fairly evenly by prior raters. That is, all essays had received average scores ranging from 4.5 to 5.66. (see Tables 1 and 2 for students' ethnic identity, gender, raters' scores, preservice teachers' prescores and post scores)

Also unbeknownst to my students were the ethnic identities of the writers—though in some cases the writers identified themselves in their prose quite strongly. For example, one student described her life in the Philippines before coming to the U.S. Another talked about life as an African American living in the inner-city, and so on. Other essays were more what one might call "cultural," that is, their ethnic identities were not discernible from what they wrote.

After students scored the two sets of essays, at the very beginning of the semester, we discussed their assessments. We talked about surface-level errors, especially as they pertained to language minority writers. During the course of the

semester, I introduced various other activities, strategies, and readings relative to composition pedagogy, assessment, and issues of diversity. We looked at NCTE's position on "the students' right to their own language," and differences in prose development from culturally diverse writers.

They read literature appropriate for secondary level students including such nonmainstream works as Laurence Yep's *Dragon Wings*, Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street*, Virginia Hamilton's *Planet of Junior Brown*, and Margaret Craven's *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. Student remarked that prior to these novels, they knew very little of these nonmainstream writers, and even less about some of the cultures they were reading about. This was for many of them a learning experience in many ways. I ended the semester by giving students the opportunity to evaluate the essays again. The second time around, their scores had changed. (see Tables 1 & 2)

Looking at this data, several factors become apparent:

- In all cases but one, preservice teachers' first scores were lower than the "expert" raters.
- In all cases but one, preservice teachers' first scores remained either constant, or were raised substantially by the end of the semester.
- 11th grade essay #9—written by a European American—was rated higher during the first round of assessments, but came down somewhat during the second round.

- The European American score which was raised significantly (11th grade, #5) was an essay which spoke with a very strong personal voice, an attribute my students didn't think they should value at the beginning of the course.
- Essays which received large jumps, 11th grade #2 and #6, and 10th grade #2 and #9, were written by students whose ethnicities were very apparent in their work.
- Finally, while African American scores came up slightly, these results were less dramatic. This data invites further investigation.

I will end this paper by presenting 10th grade essay #9. The score for this essay jumped 1.21 points from the beginning of the semester. In many ways, this paper is the most interesting and created the most discussion among my students. (see Figure 3)

At first, this essay was the most discrepant. That is, some students thought it was excellent. But others said it didn't answer the question. After discussion, we came to the agreement that it not only fit the assignment, but was also a beautifully crafted piece. Since it did not fit the typical mold, at the first reading many didn't know what to do with it. However, on the second reading, having had many weeks to consider other perspectives and other cultural points of view, most of my students felt it was truly one of the better essays in the group.

Thus I ended this pilot study believing that if we are, indeed, to provide proper evaluation for all of our students, we mus .oaden our view of equitable assessment, and validate the excellent work of all of our students.

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Figure 1

Scoring Guide

Essay must respond to assigned task, parts of which may be implied.

Score

6 High degree of competence: Perhaps a few minor errors; Well organized, clear ideas, syntactic variety, facility with language; Generally free of errors in usage, mechanics, sentence structure

5 Clear competence: Minor errors; Generally well organized, explains key ideas, syntactic variety, facility with language; Generally free of errors in usage, mechanics, sentence structure

4 Competence: Adequately organized, explains key ideas, adequate facility with language; Some errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure

3 Some competence but clearly flawed: One or more of these weaknesses: Inadequate organization, explanation of key ideas; Pattern/ accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure; Limited or inappropriate word choice

2 Limited competence and seriously flawed: One or more of these weaknesses: Weak organization; Few related details; Serious errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, word choice

1 Fundamental deficiencies: Serious errors, incoherent, undeveloped

Figure 2

Assignment

Many people feel that the communities they grew up in had a major influence on their lives. For some, the community provided a positive environment where they received the support necessary for growth, education, hope for the future. Others feel that their communities had a negative influence, holding them back through fear of violence or drugs, lack of support or opportunities to succeed.

What kind of influence has your community had on you? Write an essay describing your community and show how some aspect of it has had a positive or negative influence on your life.

Figure 3.

The "Adolquin" streets of the Barrio"

As the raindrops thunder and shake the ceiling and roofs of clay, cement and wood houses, the streets overflood forming a two or one and one half feet deep river, which rakes and takes every dirt or vulgar or clean object, such as a dead dogs bones, banana pealings, avocado seeds, mamones pealings, pieces of crumbled paper which was maybe the rest of a document or homework of some student. People come out and celebrate; children come out naked and cross the temporary river which has formed. Girls and boys come out and rinse their sweating oily bodies with the warm raindrops of the grey dark clouds in the sky. They wear shoes so broken glasses of windows, dishes, and cups won't cut their rough hard chicken feet, but gentle to the sharpness of glass and metal mechanical objects leftovers from pots, pans, and the hard metal bars, which

protect houses from being burglarized from stealthy silent poor thieves.
As the raindrops fade away, flying ants and termites mate and dig a hole in the gentle rocky ground to lay their white baby rice-shaped eggs, and build a colony as years pass by.
People start going to their houses with happiness and bless their god for the moment of rain. for in their Barrio such as in all others water is rationalized and electricty is also.
Moments after the rain during the evening, the bread man passes by and sells it cheaper to those that he knows and likes. His smile on his face and his smooth dark red face reminded us about or small but delicious dinner with bread covered with honey. Even though dinner was not always delicious, the bread which the man sold to us was always soft and crunchy. We would buy pieces which are triangular shape pasteries covered with honey and butter

and sometimes cheese with sugar
melted in the inside.
As the day passed on the
moon would shine and the sunset
would make the sky look and
appear red to our dark brown eyes.
The stars would appear one by
one slowly, but beautiful with
their blinking white bright
light, as like if you turned on
a light slowly ~~wait~~ according
to the darkness of the sky

Scores from Raters and Preservice Teachers

Table 1

Grade 11

Student	American	Gender	Raters' Score Average	PreT1 Average (19)	PreT2 Average (19)	PreT1-PreT2 Difference
1	European	M	5.25	4.82	4.96	+.14
2	Filipino	M	4.66	3.56	3.97	+.41
3	Latino	M	5	4.74	4.76	+.02
4	African	M	5	4.48	4.60	+.12
5	European	M	4.5	3.78	4.35	+.57
6	Filipino	F	5	3.84	4.28	+.44
7	Latina	F	5	3.75	4.01	+.26
8	African	F	4.5	3.86	3.88	+.02
9	European	F	4.5	5.13	4.95	-.18

Table 2

Grade 10

Student	American	Gender	Raters' Score Average	PreT1 Average (20)	PreT2 Average (20)	PreT1-PreT2 Difference
1	European	F	4.75	3.95	4.26	+.31
2	Latino	M	4.75	4.25	4.81	+.56
3				3.68	3.88	+.20
4	Filipino	F	5.5	4.78	5.14	+.36
5	European		4.5	3.49	3.53	+.04
6	African	M	5	3.93	4.24	+.31
7	Filipino	F	5.5	4.09	4.10	+.01
8	European	F	5.5	4.18	4.35	+.17
9	Latino	M	5.66	3.69	4.90	+1.21
10	Filipino	F	4.75	4.31	4.38	+.07